

**Proceedings from the First Secretary's Women
Employees Advisory Council Forum**

*The Secretary's Women Employees Advisory Council
February 2002*

Introduction

On Wednesday October 10, 2001, the USDA Secretary's Women Employees Advisory Council held the first event of its kind at USDA "Women's Issues: A Conversation". It was a national outreach conference to provide a forum for USDA employees to have an open dialogue and to interact with USDA management. Experts provided informative sessions on career advancement, training, diversity, and balancing work and home issues. Over four hundred USDA employees and managers attended the training forum, and it received outstanding ratings on evaluations from attendees. The event was so successful in fact, that the Secretary's Women Employees Advisory Council plans to hold another education and training forum in 2002 building upon the momentum of the first.

In the attached document we are sharing the comments of employees who attended the forum in an effort to bring them to the attention of the upper echelons of USDA. As the Secretary's Women Employees Advisory Council indicated it would before the forum took place, in another forthcoming document we will be asking what each mission area is doing to address these concerns. It is our hope that by ensuring that employee concerns are heard that USDA will become a more harmonious, efficient, and effective workplace recognizing and using the talents of all of its employees to the fullest.

If you have questions or comments on the report please direct them to Susan Notar, Women Employees Program Manager, Susana.notar@usda.gov (202) 720-6337.

Executive Summary

The Forum was held in the Jefferson auditorium on October 10, 2001. Despite taking place one short month after the events of September 11th, over four hundred USDA employees were in attendance. The Forum began with opening remarks from Dr. Alma C. Hobbs, Co-Chair of the Secretary's Women Employees Advisory Council. Next, three nationally known speakers presented. Dr. William Guillory, Ph.D. of Innovations, International, spoke on overcoming obstacles to achieving your own notion of success, and on the process of living consistently with your notion of success.

The second speaker, Ms. Evelyn White, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Human Resources for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services addressed training and career advancement in the context of the Federal government. After a brief lunch break, attendees heard from Ms. Leslie Milk, Lifestyles Editor, *Washingtonian* Magazine. Ms. Milk spoke about the difficult issues facing the "sandwich" generation, the generation with children still living at home but also taking care of elderly parents. These issues include, but are not limited to: financial concerns, time limitations, and stress.

Employees then had the opportunity to have an open dialogue with Mission Area Heads or their representatives, with Dr. Rovenia Brock moderating the session. Employees expressed interest in hearing from the panel on a wide array of issues including the need for USDA to address promotions and training for women and minorities, how discriminatory managers are dealt with at USDA, the importance of mentoring programs, balancing work and family issues, and what proactive steps are being taken to overcome prejudice, discrimination and the "glass ceiling" at USDA.

Women's Forum

“Women's Issues: A Conversation”

Summary Chart

Questions from Employees:	Answers from Panel:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do we initiate a mentoring program along with making the organization better? 	Mentor without bounds; self responsibility- doing what's meaningful to share responsibility, and us.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can managers use union contract to supersede and violate disability laws? 	If FSA-Agency specific contact conflicts with status, discussion with union to come to resolution---reasonable accommodation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workforce statistic percentages are very low for minorities, what strategies are in place to correct this? 	Disadvantage in some fields-low percentage of women/minority with a Ph.D., in some fields working with middle school kids- science/engineering shrinking size of agencies-not hiring as many people. Senior Managers working with diversity committees of professional organizations to try to influence diversity of profession.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who recruits recruiters? 	Recruit at colleges with high minority percentages has been most effective, represent US diversity; Ensure workplace is friendly/open to all work to retain employees.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can we start a formal caregivers support at the USDA? 	Someone with Senior Management needs to get it started.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What proactive steps do you plan to take to overcome prejudice, discrimination and the glass ceiling? 	Not Answered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can you change people's behavior and attitudes so that they no longer practice prejudice/discrimination? 	Know each other better work/travel together. Leaders need to be aware, have their antennas up, intervene appropriately and take positive action. Management meets with advisory councils, etc. to deal with issues.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where are the mission heads today? Their absence translates to a lack of support/interest. 	Absence is not always indifference all on same team-can represent mission areas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training—What if anything, is being done to 	Encourage supervisors/managers to take

encourage employees to take full advantage of training opportunities?	advantage of training dollars.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What happens to money set a side for training that is not spent? Can others spend it? Or is it spent for different things? 	Varies from agency to agency. Money could be spent of other things.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “We grow our own”-USDA hires/recruits from minority schools, etc. but we do not mentor and these young people die on the vine. 	Help people find the gold and be there for them institutionalize and select a mentor.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How will issues raised here be shared with in the mission areas? 	Not Answered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many individuals without a degree but with job skills are passed over for jobs. What can we do to develop programs to address this? 	Upward mobility is possible; some jobs require certain degrees/credits in areas. Move some clerical into another job series/training paid of education.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting a promotion is like finding a needle in a haystack. What can we do to hold senior manager accountable for hiring unqualified or less qualified? 	Conduct a survey of women who have not been promoted in years. USDA agency’s cultures organization are very distinct. Primary occupations/origins of agency have a big influence. Both management and employees must work together.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part-time workers are often last in line for opportunities, training, etc. What are the trends in part-time work at agencies? Are there barriers? What can be done? Are there support groups? 	Not Answered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What have you done in your agency to hold people accountable for discriminatory actions? 	Firing and early retirement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many written questions have to do with prejudice and discrimination, people feel they are being treated unjustly or unfairly; moderator asks panel if they were aware of feelings about discrimination at the USDA? 	Not Answered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are you doing to keep the seasoned employees who we need to train the new 	Hire at entry level, while seasoned employees are here to train.

employees who we need to train the new employees?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family leave/maternity leave-how do we institute them to make them affordable? Are managers following the policy-How do you insure this? 	Not Answered

Conference Evaluation – Tabulation
Women Employees Advisory Council
Women’s Issues: A Conversation

Rate the Overall Conference	Yes	Somewhat	No
Was the selection of training topics useful?	145	7	0
Did this training meet your overall expectations?	125	25	0
Do you feel the training was well organized?	140	9	0
Would you like to see this training conference as an annual event?	144	3	0

Program	Excellent	Very good	Good	Poor
Overcoming Obstacles and Barriers to Achieve Success, or “You can have your cake and eat it too, but only if you Bake it!” William A. Guillory, Ph.D., Innovations International, Inc.	87	43	17	2
“What Do You Want: A Job or a Career?” Evelyn White, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Human Resources, DHHS	132	30	4	0
“A Heroine is Nothing but a Sandwich” Leslie Milk, Lifestyles Editor, <i>Washingtonian</i>	105	33	12	1
Open Dialogue with Mission Area Heads or Mission Area Head Representatives	40	27	35	7

Issues on Cards

- How do you propose to address the issue of “systemic exclusion?”
(This is a barrier to success in USDA)
- What do you do if you feel you excel at your job but your annual review does not reflect that? (I ask for feedback, volunteer assignments, and like my job.
- About 2 years ago, an issue was raised concerning changing the rules for maternity leave. A congresswoman suggested that instead of forcing an employee to deplete all of their vacation & sick leave for maternity leave, but to develop a maternity leave plan like private industry. What has happened to this issue? Is it something that could happen in the near future?
- Are there upward mobility programs within USDA?
(There should be and probably are but I’ve never heard about them.)
Are they announced?
- How does one maintain values, culture, and identity in a male dominated organization with culture differences?
- Ceiling problems for women and minorities in USDA are not new.
- In your Mission Area, what proactive steps you plan to take to address these issues in the next six months?
- What is being done regarding the racial discrimination of African American females and other minority employees in the Southern Regional Division of the Rural Utilities Services?
- Can USDA work to eliminate inequities facing PT-Workers? E.g. lack of holiday pay, limits on training opportunities, limits on promotions?
- The Mission Area DA is not present. How do we get our concerns addressed?
- A civil rights manager, who was also my supervisor, sexually harassed me. This supervisor has 3 sexual harassment complaints against him, lower senior management refuses to handle the situation. I have been reassigned at my request; why does senior management allow this type of behaviors to continue from their managers? Especially when they continue to harass and continue this same type of behavior with other employees? Why do they fail to address these complaints? Is it because they managers and the employees are black?
- How do you get ahead in your chosen profession, when you know your immediate supervisor does not have your best interest at heart? Are there any other alternatives other than leaving your position?
- There was a lot of discussion about having or being a mentor. This was one point towards a ladder of success. Does any USDA agency have a formal mentoring program? Are there any plans for an USDA-wide program?
- Racism is prevalent in USDA’s Civil Rights Office areas. People do not walk the walk or talk the talk. How can we expect managers to treat employees with dignity and respect when it fails at the most crucial offices that are supposed to carry out fairness?

- I have worked at the USDA for over 20 years. It seems that a lot of senior women who have made it to the ranks of GS-14 and above feel the need to lead by the need to lead the “bully system.” This seems prevalent through out the USDA. What can you do or recommend to these women the appropriate ways to supervise, lead, motivate and inspire their employees, rather than by control, threats, negative communication and constant stress hearing ineffective communication?
- Why does it seem as though there are never enough funds allocated from fiscal year to fiscal year for training and other career enhancement, but there is always a sufficient or more allocations for travel and seminars for upper management?
- How do you become an active member of the W.E.A.C?
- How does a women deal with an overbearing male boss that only has negative comments, deny training, etc? Employee is on probation also.

Issues Discussed

- How to make the organization better during periods of change (who moved my cheese).
- Mentoring program for agency?
- Agency’s implementation of disability regulations/laws (used and misuse of union contract)?
- What strategies are in place to improve the overall workforce profile for minorities, women, and person with disabilities?
- How do you start formal caregivers support groups at USDA?
- What happened to upward mobility?
- What is USDA doing about the glass ceiling and improving diversity?
- Where are the Mission Heads today—is this an indication of lack of interest?
- What is being done to encourage employees to take advantage of continuing education funds?
- What happens to continuing education funds that are not spent?
- What is being done regarding minority student (college) when hired into an office that does not have a mentoring program and at times an unfriendly work environment?
- Why not have career-enhancing programs for those without degrees?
- What can we do to include minorities, women, and persons with disabilities in politics of the organization selection process?
- What are the trends within USDA agencies for part-time workers? Are there barriers; and training opportunities?
- What actions have the agencies taken against managers who continue to discriminate?
- What is being done to retain senior employees that will be needed to train new employees?
- How to implement a maternal leave program (similar to private sector maternal leave programs)?

Synopsis Comments: What topics would you like to see at future conferences?

Career Advancement

- How to apply for the Senior Executive Service
- How to obtain a position as a Confidential Assistant to senior staff
- Being recognized for job skills outside of job description
- Upward Mobility programs
- Women in non-traditional jobs
- Moving into the professional ranks
- Developing political strategies
- Networking (including developing, maintaining, and using technology to network)
- Breaking through the “glass ceiling”
- Women and disabilities
- Continuing Education
- IDP’s
- Career Counseling
- Survey all women regarding constraints on promotions and training for advancement

Professionalism and Training

- Time management
- Working with difficult supervisors
- Working with colleagues with poor hygiene
- Mentoring
- Work place attire
- Work place conduct
- Interpersonal relationship skills in the workplace
- Setting and accomplishing goals
- Accepting change
- Communications --assertiveness/empowerment training
- Overcoming difficult/negative work situations
- Career Repair
- Training Opportunities
- Pursuing a career change
- Invite additional prominent, successful and inspiring men and women in the community (such as those selected for the October 10 forum, to speak

Balancing work and home

- Maternity leave and job security
- Personal financial management
- Balancing career development and family

- Life transitions (e.g., single adult, married adult, parent, aging, health issues, preparing for retirement)
- Child Care and Elder Care
- How to encourage OPM to create a leave donor program for “sandwich” employees who have used all sick leave and cannot afford to take leave without pay?

Other

- Expand and broaden the topics of discussion for October 10.
- Address discrimination. Work on establishing Advisory Councils or Teams to address and resolve as many issues as each agency can (such as the Farm Service Agency does).
- Work diligently on diversity hiring and promoting a more diverse work force to better reflect our nation.
- Another Evelyn White speaker.
- Examine how other agencies handle diversity issues and any “best practices” and implement them at USDA.

Positive Comments Regarding Program Content

- Evelyn White was very helpful.
- Leslie Milk was inspirational.
- Excellent and much needed forum.
- I recommend that this be followed up with a plan of action to help women put some of the suggestions heard today in place or into practice. Training sessions, workshops, set up formal networks, etc. You may want to request interested persons to volunteer to help with follow-up activities.
- I really enjoyed Dr. Guillory and Evelyn White.
- This conference is excellent and I would very much like to become a member, but it is unfortunate I cannot because I’m being hired by another Federal agency because I cannot move up the ladder within USDA. I know that I would be a great asset to the council.
- Ms. White’s presentation was inspiring.
- Speakers were excellent—different styles, different focus, and good messages.
- Why not expand this to a Career Development seminar as part of a USDA training program. The Seminar could be 3-5 days and cover all the nuts and bolts, such as How to chart a CD plan, how to dress for success, how to be an effective team member, provide an analysis of personality types, leaders (effective leadership development resources). The benefactors will be the employees and the Department. Also increased knowledge helps determine whether they are in the right career field. Some will leave USDA, others will come.
- Great workshop. We should do more in the future.
- The Women’s Council developed a dynamic program. I left fulfilled and confirmed that USDA is steadily improving for its employees.

- I would like to take my hat off to Joyce Heishchman. She was the only Mission Head brave enough to show up.
- This conference was a very good idea, and it should definitely be repeated on an annual basis. It is a great atmosphere for networking and taking advantage of meeting other professional women.
- Open dialogue moderator was excellent.
- The diversity of speakers was well planned.
- This conference was organized, professional, and informative. Actually, I think it was so good that I would have paid to receive the information and sharing. I will be looking forward to next year. I thank the Women Employees Advisory Council for this Conference. I noticed the starting on time—thank you!
- The Q & A session was very helpful.
- Thank you for such a beautiful day. This committee did an excellent job in reaching such great speakers.
- Thanks, Dr. Hobbs, for pulling this very special day together.
- This was a great conference, hopefully one of many to come. Will the answers from the questions come out in a newsletter? We'll be waiting!
- Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful!
- What does management plan to do after six months? Will there be any action plan? Proposals for improvement?
- This was a wonderful experience for me.
- The Q & A sessions were great. Dr. Guillory would have had more questions if there were a Q & A after his talk.
- Evelyn White was inspirational and to the point!
- Believe Dr. Rho did an excellent job as a moderator/facilitator.
- Hope this is an annual meeting.
- Evelyn White was an excellent speaker. Please invite her back.
- Leslie Milk was a captivating and enjoyable speaker. I hung on her every word and laughed harder than I had all day.
- Dr. Rho was an excellent facilitator. She kept things going and on track.
- Thank you for having Ms. White. It was great to hear and receive information from within and outside of USDA.
- More stats on status of women at USDA would be great; those provided were extremely interesting.

Comments/Recommendations Regarding Program Content—Critical

- More people of color to participate as Mission Area Representatives.
- I did think that the “dialogue” was not effective, but the FFAS Mission Area and specifically FSA were not represented for some reason. In order for these things to be truly effective, it would be important for all employees’ agencies or mission area heads to be represented.
- How come there was no one there to represent DA?
- How did the title “You can have your cake and eat it too, but only if you bake it!” fit into the presentation or the visual aides?

- Regarding the Open Dialogue—moderator was too aggressive/obnoxious—Bin Laden comment was in poor taste; panel was great as well as responsive to sometimes rudely worded questions.
- The panel was not as knowledgeable as they should have been. Maybe someone from Departmental Administration, Assistant Secretary, Deputy Assistant Secretary, etc. should be on the panel next year.
- I recommend that the panel be made up of people who can understand the issues of women. The comments from the panel skated around the questions/issues raised.
- Have mission area representation be people who can really respond to issues raised.
- You had nine panelists during open dialogue, however only three (maybe four) opened their mouths after introductions.
- FAS was not well represented. Do they not take these kinds of arenas seriously?
- The panel did not appear equipped to deal with most of the questions! The moderator, Dr. Rho, was excellent!
- William Guillory had good ideas but not well linked together and no solid examples—might have been better to open with a woman.
- The open dialogue was not effective, because the panelists gave very nonspecific responses that did not provide me with any real insight. It was essentially boring.
- Panel seemed fearful at times.
- Why were so few women here and how can others be reached? If so, the conference auditorium will need to be larger.
- The panel couldn't answer many of the audience questions.
- Mission Area discussions should be early afternoon to keep people there.
- There was a panel member from my agency who did not mention this conference to his staff (OC).
- I feel that the panel tried to make employees wholly responsible for the actions of management. While I agree that employees have responsibility for his/her own career, I still feel that USDA is run by the “good ole boys” and people of another color have to fight too hard to get in and most never do.
- I would like to see more Mission Heads at these types of conferences. Their lack of presence makes employees feel that these issues are not very important to them.
- The NRCS is one of the largest agencies; I wondered why you did not invite NRCS Senior Manager to attend the Open Dialogue with Mission Areas as a panelist.
- The moderators were hesitant to answer so many questions. Overall they were helpful.
- CSREES was not represented! There are issues that could not be addressed satisfactorily.
- These forums never seem to address accountability among management.
- Mission Area heads need to really get a clue about what is happening in USDA. You can sit and talk about accountability but management isn't willing to address

the problem until you pull in senior officials and that time then something may be done.

- What was the deal with four flip charts being written on? Somewhat distracting without a clear purpose at the time.
- Where are the male Mission Heads? We have one, but panel doesn't look representative of USDA workforce. Is it that only female (mostly) Mission Heads agreed to attend? If so, evidence of an issue here for sure!
- Regarding Mission Area Heads: need the actual leader, not a substitute. Better answer could come straight from the top.
- Thought Dr. Guillory was a dry speaker. He has a good topic but needs to be more dynamic. I was falling asleep and noticed that a lot of people left at the break after his talk. I would suggest opening the conference with a more dynamic presentation.
- Have noted that it appears very few higher-level women (in at least our agency) participated.

Comments: Conference Logistics

Location/Logistics

- Move meeting to another location where there would be tables set up for participants. Also consider expanding it to two days.
- Need more space for beverages/mingling.
- Suggest next conference be held in a room with tables for taking notes and water available. I appreciate that you've videotaped the session for future use by the regional offices and others.
- Beverages and food great—but maybe the USDA should offer fruits and vegetables.
- Bring recycling bins for soda cans.

Conference Materials

- In the future, I would like to see handouts that reinforce the speaker's ideas.
- Liked the inclusion of books in materials.
- Share the participant list for all for networking.
- Would suggest including a small notepad with your pamphlets and handouts.
- The book will be helpful in learning how to get out of the "box" and finding yourself.
- Request large print materials for visually impaired individuals. (Are books available in large print format?)

Participants

- Expand this program to all USDA employees and not just for females.
- The word needs to get out more around the Department –more posters up around the entire USDA complex; talked about at the lower level management meeting and told

to get the word to employees. What proactive steps do you plan to take to overcome prejudice, discrimination and the glass ceiling?

- Stress to managers to send at least one person to participate from each branch.